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ABSTRACT

The success of the Minimbah Aboriginal Preschool in New South Wales (Australia) is evidenced by happy staff and children, low staff turnover, and the later success of Minimbah's children in mainstream schools. Also, parents were frequently present as helpers and were apparently confident in entering the premises, talking with staff members, and seeking assistance. A key factor in the success of the school has been the leadership of its Aboriginal principal. The principal has encouraged students to aspire to mainstream success through practices of Aboriginal pride and Aboriginal curriculum perspectives, while accommodating the apparent contradictions and political pressures of maintaining this position. Power and responsibility have also been devalued in the hierarchical management structure so that every staff member can exercise choices within his or her role and question the role itself. Responsibility and therefore power are shared. In dealing with the mainstream power structure, the principal avoids direct opposition, but that does not preclude questioning the structures and processes of mainstream organizations that control funding, or exercising strategic power through networks to gain support. Aboriginal "kin" responsibilities are incorporated into the preschool structure so that each kin group is represented within the staff. This seems to insulate the preschool to some degree from any factional fighting taking place in the broader Aboriginal community. Analyzing these dynamics through Foucauldian notions of power, subjection, and resistance seems a useful way to represent some of the shifting and transitory flows of power that make for successful Indigenous leadership in this preschool. (Contains 12 references.) (TD)

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Successful Early Childhood Indigenous Leadership

ABSTRACT: In a collaborative interview/reflection process, the Director and staff of Minimbah Aboriginal Preschool, Armidale are working with Kerith Power from UNE' s Early Childhood Program to document and analyse effective Indigenous leadership strategies as a model for further leadership development as their preschool grows and changes.This paper examines Dianne Roberts' strategies of leadership in the light of Foucault's notions of 'moblie and transitory' points of resistance within a context of shifting power relations. The information gained from this pilot study will be used in a large leadership development program across several Aboriginal Preschools in northern NSW.

ED 459 027

Minimbah Preschool, in Cooks Rd, Armidale, started as a Save the Children Preschool in the seventies, headed by a white director. Dianne Roberts, a parent who had been working in the Mary White College kitchens, became a cleaner then a preschool assistant. Friends urged her to become qualified. This she did through Armidale TAFE, Teachers' College and Newcastle University. She has now been the Aboriginal Director at Minimbah for eleven years.

I taught for nearly ten years under a system which *told* me what I had to do. I had little involvement with organising my classroom. Through this experience I learnt that I had to give my staff the freedom to organise their classroom and that makes them better teachers. If I did not take into consideration the many issues that had come up when I was working within the old system, than I would not be able to identify and address the difficulties that are inherent in that old system (Roberts, 1999).

I first became aware of Minimbah's success as an Aboriginal Preschool in 1996 when I was researching models of success in order to advise another Aboriginal preschool I had been asked to help.What was different about Minimbah?

1 Minimbah staff and children seemed confident, happy, enthusiastic and outgoing.

2 Both ancillary and teaching staff seemed comfortable with acting in several different roles.

3 There was no sense of 'crisis management'.There were systems in place so that when problems arose, someone took responsibility for activating a set process to overcome the problem.

4 Parents were frequently present as helpers and were apparently confident in entering the premises, talking with staff and seeking assistance from Mrs Roberts .

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5 An endless procession of non-Aboriginal helpers were obviously welcome and were fitted into the routine without being allowed to dominate the situation..

6. There was, and is a very low rate of staff turnover in both the primary contact staff and in the ancillary staff. The children, who don't make distinctions between teaching and other staff, gain obvious benefits from this stability.

7. Recent results from a longitudinal project on literacy show that Minimbah children first assessed in 1985 when they were four years old, are performing well in their year 4 and year 5 work in mainstream schools, in advance of national averages for Aboriginal children (Dunn, 1998).

I felt, from my observations of Minimbah, that one of the key factors in its success was its leadership by Mrs Dianne Roberts. I was privileged to work alongside Dianne for four years and have therefore been able to observe how this leadership operates.

My aim in my current research is to try to collaboratively tease out with the staff, the many aspects of successful leadership . For Minimbah, the challenge is to retain the vision and extend it while the organisation grows.For me, it is to document, analyse and discuss Dianne Roberts' leadership in order to study what makes it 'work'.

In my thinking about Minimbah I am concerned not so much about a so-called authentically 'Aboriginal' practice of leadership so much as to try to capture some of the storylines of how success in leadership is constituted at Minimbah and in its community, by Aboriginal people.

This is material which was supplied by Dianne in her collaboration with me as a co-researcher, as an example of some of her professional development work with staff:

Overhead projector slide:

K Knowledge which is
O openly shared and consequently
O outreaching to both Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal groups which is also
R reliable and therefore may provide
I insight necessary to improve Aboriginal children's life chances in non-Aboriginal schools (Roberts, 1999).

There is no doubt here that the discourse of 'success' at Minimbah is firmly placed in terms of the children being able to negotiate mainstream education in order to increase their

life chances. There is also little doubt in Minimbah's philosophy that the best way to do this with Aboriginal children and staff is to emphasise pride and positivity in their Aboriginality.

I think this might be an illustration of Foucault's insistence on modern mechanisms of power as being productive as well as negative: 'We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it "excludes", it represses", it "censors", it "abstracts",

it "masks", it "conceals". In fact, power produces: it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth' (Foucault, 1977, *Discipline and Punish*, p.194, cited in McHoul & Grace, 1997).

Thinking about Minimbah through these ideas has two effects on my work with Aboriginal leaders in early childhood:

> (i) it cuts out binary oppositions, represented in this field by my own 'do-gooding' tendency to represent mainstream values as repressive and by writers such as Stephen Harris in *Two Way Aboriginal Schooling* (1990). Harris represents the preservation of Aboriginal languages and culture as an 'either-or' situation, where the teaching of English and the whole discursive practice of schooling is portrayed as destructive of Aboriginal values, language and culture and the only way to success is to separate the Aboriginal and white domains so that the children become 'bicultural'. This differs markedly from Dianne's inclusive and eclectic approach which borrows from any and all cultures and happily labels this as 'Aboriginal' because it is undoubtedly Aboriginal people who are determining the curriculum.
>
> (ii) It gives me a language in which to express the strength of the position which Minimbah has arrived at: it seems to be an organisation which by a process of 'subjection' in Foucault's sense of 'the construction of subjects in and as a collection of techniques and flows of power '(McHoul and Grace, 1997) has actually become stronger.

To maintain her standing with both the Aboriginal and European community requires Dianne to live with contradictions and to suffer flak from both sides. To 'succeed' as an Aboriginal person in Aboriginal terms can often mean to 'fail' in European terms, and vice-versa. An example of this at Minimbah is that in Aboriginal terms in Armidale, by tradition, family is more important than rational/legal considerations like qualifications. Dianne Roberts' preference for trained staff and for staff from a range of several different extended family backgrounds, rather than solely from her own family, puts her at odds and at risk with some Aboriginal people. In Anglo/Australian terms, to give family members a job is considered to be nepotism, whereas in Aboriginal terms not to favour family members could be constituted as having failed in important responsibilities. By refusing to take up these binary oppositions, Dianne strengthens her position .

The usefulness of applying discourse analysis to this situation lies, in Foucault's words, not in 'amusing myself by making the game more complicated for a few lively minds' (1978b, p.23) but in identifying the 'field of *power* and the positions it generates for *subjects*'. In this situation 'subjection' has acted as a strengthening mechanism.

in Dianne's words:

(play excerpt 1 from tape, pause)

Minimbah's family has seven different family groups. It is necessary to have these different family groups work alongside each other and the different families need to be able to communicate and support each group's differences. (Roberts, 1999).

As defined by Foucault, resistance is inherent in power relations and it is characterised as 'mobile and transitory' rather than fixed and ongoing (McHoul and Grace, 1997, pp 84-86). Dianne positions herself in many different ways: sometimes in an emancipatory fashion as an advocate, sometimes as an adult educator and sometimes as an 'Aunty' or elder. Sometimes she defers to staff who know more about a particular situation because of their kinship connections. Rarely, inside Minimbah, she takes up the legal/rational role of Director, depending on her judgement of the needs of the situation and, importantly, depending on to whom she is speaking. I believe this way of operating corresponds to the notion of 'mobile and transitory' points of resistance within a power dynamic . I think it enables individuals to be powerful in the preschool and this is indicated in their language. The same staff member who thinks Minimbah is just like other preschools thinks that Dianne's leadership is special :' It's the freedom of speech' (Interview, 9/9/98).

The rotation of roles is a strong feature of each area of the preschool's operation.

As Director I introduced my vision for Minimbah Preschool and Primary School. I suggested that over two years no one could have the same vision, but by sharing our different visions of "Minimbah", everyone could work together to get the vision going.

I used overheads to show the designs for the " new school'; where it's going. I used overhead sheets identifying the hierarchical system: this system concentrates all the power and decision making at the top. The flow of information is always downward.This is, in general, how it has operated within Minimbah previously, and as part of the education structure in general.

In this system there is no sharing of responsibility. As Director I am required to use the structure, but how can I use it and modify it? I want to use the system to make my employees feel capable of working together and developing skills that enable them to work with colleagues, and not feel they're doing all the work themselves... I could give staff members 'things' and the staff would 'do' things required by the law, but my staff wouldn't have any input into what things or if they needs things at all. In some cases staff members will gladly work under that

system because they don't have to put any effort or initiative into the classroom. (Roberts, 1999).

When they are asked about their own exercise of leadership within the preschool, staff will often deny that they exercise any: some see leadership as 'bossing others around'. Dianne has incorporated into each job description a measure of responsibility, for instance, every staff member has control over the budget for the function they play, as teacher, cook, bus driver or cleaner. Some of what I would call 'leadership' functions are thus regarded by staff members as a normal part of the job where they might refuse to take on others, like directing other staff. Dianne deals with this by rotating what I would call leadership roles in the classroom: every face to face staff member, whether trained or not, has a turn of planning and directing the program, setting up the environment , maintaining the room or supervising the outdoor program. A similar philosophy governs her allocation of administrative functions between the clerical and ancillary staff. All have freedom to exercise some choices within their role and to question the role itself. Responsibility and therefore power is shared, even if the people who are doing this don't call it 'leadership'.

For many years because of what has been done, Aboriginal employees did not feel that they were responsible for preparing an environment of learning, exploring, caring and constructing. It was not up to them to design appropriate activities for their clientele who were different. For example, they had their own beliefs and values, their own attitudes, and their own cultures that they brought into the environment of learning.(Roberts, 1999).

In speaking of the preschool's relationship to the wider society, one of the drawings Dianne frequently makes is a small circle representing, at times, Aboriginal people and organisations and at other times, Minimbah. Accompanying this is a large circle representing 'the mainstream'. Sometimes Minimbah and Aboriginal organisations are linked to the mainstream by arrows and sometimes the smaller circle is enclosed within the larger one. I think these diagrams represent shifting notions of the power relations between Minimbah and what Dianne calls the 'mainstream'. She uses these diagrams to represent her strategies of working in partnership and sometimes of manoevring around and past the resistances she finds in both the 'mainstream' and in Aboriginal circles.She does not espouse direct opposition as a strategy and in many situations I have observed her refusing to take it up. However this does not preclude questioning the structures and processes of mainstream organisations which control Minimbah's funding, or exercising strategic power through networks to gain support.

The practices that seem to 'work' for Minimbah include:

1. Aspiring to 'mainstream ' success through practices of Aboriginal pride and Aboriginal curriculum perspectives, while accommodating the apparent contradictions and the political pressures of maintaining this position.

2. Devolving power and responsibility so that designated positions in the hierarchical management structure do not reflect hierarchical practices day to day.

3. Including Aboriginal 'kin' responsibilities into the preschool structure so that each kin group is represented within the staff.This seems to insulate the preschool to some degree from any faction fighting taking place in the broader Aboriginal community because each family has a stake in the preschool.

Analysing these dynamics through Foucauldian notions of power, subjection and resistance seems to be a useful way to represent some of the shifting and transitory flows of power that make for successful Indigenous leadership in this preschool.

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